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Fostering lifelong interest in research among teachers at their postgraduate infancy

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Abstract

SKBI6113 Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is one elective course offered at the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) that is predominantly enrolled by teachers teaching English as a Second Language (ESL). To some of these teachers, the course plays an important role in developing their research skill for thesis writing. This paper presents six classroom interventions initiated to help a batch of ESL teachers develop their research skills in second language acquisition studies. Their favourable comments to the majority of the interventions suggest that lifelong interest in research can be fostered if proper interventions were introduced at their postgraduate infancy.

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1. Introduction

Postgraduate students who are required to work on research, particularly action research, are typically faced with problems to complete their research on time (Zuber-Skerrit & Fletcher, 2007). Some of them may give up working on their research whereas some others may just fail the research component of their course (Zuber-Skerrit & Fletcher, 2007). While it is common for students to be anxious when are required to be involved in research, students should be able to deal with their anxiety themselves. Instead, what usually happens is that students often find difficulty in dealing with the process of learning how to conduct research (Kracker, 2002) and this necessarily leads to anxiety. According to Kracker (2002) the anxiety students face should be reduced because it will help students to be more satisfied with their learning process, which will eventually lead them to producing better research papers and obtain “better cognitive skills, and better information literacy skills” (p. 290).

When students are unable to cope with anxiety in conducting research, the blame is often put on their instructors or research supervisors. The research supervisors are said to be responsible for the anxiety because they do not follow the correct strategies in conducting research (Boody, 2010). However, according to Boody (2010), students also should be held responsible due to the fact that they tend to study topics that do not seem to be important to their instructors and this leads them to not coming out with good findings for their supervisors.

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One common problem faced by postgraduate students when involved in research is the students' tendency to propose "research that is too broad or otherwise not able to be completed in the time available (Maxwell & Smyth, 2010, p. 409). The problem is attributed to the supervision process because according to Maxwell & Smyth (2002), the supervision process requires a long time to develop. This is due to the fact that the process of supervision does not only consist of the process of teaching and learning, but also, encompasses the development of students into becoming good researchers, and the act of "producing the research project/outcome as a social practice" (p. 409).

To a certain extent, the problems mentioned earlier are also experienced by postgraduate students in Malaysia. At the School of Language Studies and Linguistics (SoLLs), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), students enrolling for the coursework-thesis component of MA English Language Studies (ELS) Programme have to complete 8 courses prior to going through the thesis component of the Masters' programme. Within the coursework component, postgraduate students have to enroll for the compulsory research methodology course for a total of 56 contact hours. However, despite going through the research methodology course, students' performance in conducting research as soon as they embark on the research component of their postgraduate programme has always become the talk among their supervisors. The students appear not to be able to apply what they have learned in the research methodology course to their thesis writing. As a result, not only are they unable to propose interesting research areas in ELS to work on, they are also unable to write their thesis within the stipulated time frame, i.e., ideally, in one semester.

This paper presents a research designed to empower postgraduate students with experience in conducting research while they are working on their coursework in their master's degree programme. The *SKBI6113 Second Language Acquisition (SLA)* was used as a course to provide a group of postgraduate students with knowledge to conduct research related to studies in second language acquisition and writing about their research using a step-by-step course design. This paper not only describes how the course helped the students achieve the learning outcome of the course, but also, it describes how the course was designed to equip the students with knowledge to conduct research and subsequently write project papers that are of good quality. It is hoped that the common problems that students usually face as they embark in the research component of their Master's programme can be resolved.

2. Methodology

SKBI6113 SLA is one course offered as an elective course for the MA ELS programme. Naturally, the course attracts many postgraduate students who are teachers teaching English as a Second Language (ESL). They were either teachers teaching in primary schools, secondary schools, or higher learning institutions in Malaysia. Seventeen (17) teachers (5 male and 12 female) enrolled in the course in the second semester of the 2011-2012 academic session and they were at the various stages of the coursework component of their master's programme. At the beginning of the semesters, all of them were briefed on the learning outcome of the course. They were also made aware that the design of the course was aimed at assisting them with several elements of research in second language acquisition studies namely, the ability to conduct fieldwork related to second language acquisition, the ability to cite and make references to previous literature accurately, the ability to be critical on their reading, and the ability to present their ideas and results clearly.

To achieve the objective of the study, several components of research were embedded in *SKBI6113 SLA*, and these components form the methodology of this study. The components include a) Talk on "Plagiarism"; b) Topical Presentations; c) Data Collection via Fieldwork; d) Oral Report forum; e) Annotated Bibliography session; and f) Written Report submission. The teachers were informed that the components were introduced to them to help them develop their research skills as well as to expose them to a wide variety of possible research areas within the realm of ESL. The teachers were then made aware that except for the first component of the methodology, i.e., the 'talk on "Plagiarism"', all the other components of research introduced in the course will be assessed formally as part of the course assessment and they all agreed with the proposed idea. According to Hitchcock & Murphy (1999) students will engage themselves in the various stages of research if they are given the opportunity to function as "research students, data collectors, and consumers of research findings" (p. 122) themselves. Table 1 presents the six classroom interventions and what each of them hopes to achieve.

Table 1 Six interventions and their objectives

Intervention	Objective(s)
1. A talk on “Plagiarism” entitled “Plagiarism and how NOT to plagiarise”	a. Develop skill to cite published works. b. Develop skill to make references to published works. c. Avoid plagiarizing published works.
2. Topical Presentations	a. Develop understanding of topics in SLA b. Share information on SLA with course mates c. Practice collaborative learning d. Gather information on SLA studies
3. Data Collection via Fieldwork	a. Experience collecting authentic data. b. Identify problem areas in ESL by themselves
4. Oral Report Presentation	a. Share findings from fieldwork with course mates b. Get ideas from course mates with regard to their initial findings
5. Annotated Bibliography session	a. Build relevant literature review on the problem areas identified in the fieldwork. b. Describe and evaluate previous works on the field c. Locate useful information with regard to problem area d. Expose to different types of research and report writing
6. Written Report	a. Present findings in written form b. Develop understanding in problem area c. Present thoughts in an organised manner

The various interventions were introduced based on suggestions from previous findings. Where topical presentations are concerned, Seto (2002), for example, found that students were able to comprehend, process and make necessary actions on their readings and oral information in topical presentations. Topical presentations too, according to Salehuddin et al. (2012) bring benefits to both the presenters as well as their audience in a reciprocal manner (i.e., if they are able to contribute to the topical presentations in their own respective roles). With regard to collecting data via fieldwork, Hitchcock & Murphy (1999), found that students are able to “master research content” if they get themselves involved as “data collectors” and analyse the results themselves. In addition, Maxwell and Smyth (2010) suggested that the actual research experience itself enables students to learn “the intellectual demands of the project” (p. 420). The annotated bibliography writing was introduced in the course because, in the process of reading, a reader should not act as a “passive recipient” (Boody, 2010, p. 65). Since research involves wide reading (Maxwell & Smyth, 2010), writing annotated bibliography will enable students to know how and where to track down information that are useful to them while at the same time expose them to different research types and report writing styles (Rodriguez & Toews, 2005). Oral and written report, according to Slimmer (1992) allows students to comprehend more about new knowledge that are significant to them, and because of the fact that both oral and written reports allow students to present their thoughts and findings in essays and illustrations (Short, 1993), these components of research are always welcomed by students.

All the interventions were introduced to the teachers sequentially, i.e., in the order presented above. At the end of the semester, they submitted their written reports to the course instructor. An email containing a link to a “google docs” questionnaire was then sent to each of the teacher students to investigate their perception towards the course design and their knowledge with regard to research after the interventions. The following section presents the teachers’ responses to the questionnaire.

Results

Out of 17 teacher students who enrolled for the course, 14 of them responded to the questionnaire. When asked to rate their knowledge on a seven-point scale from “none” to “very well versed” with regard to research before and after the course, thirteen of the teachers indicated that their knowledge on research has increased. One indicated that his knowledge with regard to research was currently “7” (very well versed); 9 indicated “6”, and 3 indicated “5”.

The largest increase observed was an increased by 3 points (2 students). Six (6) students indicated that their knowledge increased by two points whereas 5 indicated at increase by 1 point.

When asked if the course has provided them with a wider range of possible research areas to be ventured into for their thesis writing, all fourteen of the teachers indicated that the course has exposed them to a variety of possible research areas in second language acquisition. The teachers were also asked in the questionnaire whether they would like it if the same course structure were to be used in other MA courses. Some of the responses were as follows:

- *Yes, because there is only one lecturer for a particular course and the expectations of the lecturer are clearly stated for each task. Indeed, I like the fact that the assessments are interrelated*
- *Yes, because there is a significant link between one task to another (i.e. topical presentations to the annotated bibliography to the written report). In this manner, students are able to attain a sound grasp on a certain area, not mere 'touch and go' learning. Plus, there's no quiz/test that is rote*
- *Yes. The details of how students are assessed will help them to perform well*
- *Yes, the course structure has helped me to learn a lot*
- *Yes, it is very flexible for part time students*
- *because it will avoid plagiarism*
- *I like that because we are doing something more practical in this course, gaining knowledge and skills at the same time*
- *Yes, it encourages active participation*

The teachers were also asked if they would recommend this course to other MA ELS candidates. Some of their responses were as follows:

- *Yes. Students learn a lot through their friends' presentations. They may get some ideas for their thesis.*
- *Because it can give them a theory for them to use it in class*
- *Yes because learning about how SLA is interesting and makes you think more on the factors and problem faced by second language*
- *Yes, because this course is very interesting and we could relate this course to our own experience in learning second language*
- *Definitely. It is a functional course that gives you insight and a lot of ideas in teaching*
- *Yes, this course has taught me in depth regarding SLA and it is very useful for future reference*
- *Yes, Knowing how children students acquire L2 is important in preparing a comprehensive teaching and learning process especially for educators*
- *Yes, as it would be beneficial for them in doing their research*
- *Yes ... for the extra knowledge*
- *Yes, it will be useful for research*
- *Absolutely. For MA ELS candidates who are currently teaching and those intending to teach, the course provides what teachers should know in.*

The teachers were also asked to indicate in the questionnaire the components of interventions they perceive as playing a role in helping them to prepare for research. Their responses are as follows:

Table 1 Students perception towards 5 of the six interventions

	Intervention	Percentage
1.	A talk on "Plagiarism"	57% (8 students)
2.	Topical Presentations & Oral Report	57% (8 students)
3.	Annotated Bibliography session	92.9% (13 students)
4.	Written Report	71% (10 students)

The fieldwork was not listed as one of the options the students could choose from and hence, no information was obtained with regard to how many students regard the fieldwork as being helpful in preparing them for research. However, in their report on the "strength of the course", one student indicated that the fieldwork is practical for it gives them "freedom to choose what they want to work on". One also wrote "having to do our own project – for the

fieldwork” as the strength of the course – indicating that students found fieldwork as a helpful intervention in preparing them for research. Some students also described the guidance they obtained from the various types of interventions as the strength of the course. “The content of this course and I like the step by step (*sic.*) we did before writing for observation report” was recorded as one of the responses. One even wrote “The lecturer provides specific datelines for all the coursework, making it easier for part-time teacher students ...”. When asked for suggestions to the existing course, one student wrote “I like the way the course has been designed and conducted”.

Conclusion

This paper presents six classroom interventions *SKBI6113 SLA* course coordinator introduced to a new batch of ESL teacher students to develop their skills in conducting research. It presents the teacher students’ feedback to the interventions that took place throughout the course; indicating that lifelong interest in research can be fostered among teachers if the right kind of interventions were introduced at their postgraduate infancy.

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